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ABSTRACT

To examine the development of the philosophy of education, educators, and educationists, this parody fable tells the story of a king in a faraway land who asked the old tradesmen to teach the teachers of the kingdom how to teach young people to build houses. The children learned well from this instruction and built many fine houses for the kingdom. Then the king became caught up in a movement, with other kingdoms, to develop tests in order to prove how fine each kingdom's educational system was. Consequently, the teachers felt it necessary to spend more time teaching the children how to pass house-building tests rather than how to build houses. As the children of the kingdom became proficient at passing the tests, they began to lose their house-building skills. Finally a new but poorly constructed addition to the king's mansion fell down around him. The king was left facing the questions: is it more important to be able to identify a hammer or to know how to use it? Or is there a place in the educational system for both kinds of knowledge? (NH)

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Once upon a Time, When There Were No Tests, Children Built Houses That Stood Tall and Straight...

Roger Farr

Dr. Farr originally presented a version of this talk on Reading Portfolios at the 1993 meeting of the International Reading Association.

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Once upon a time long ago and far away, there lived a happy group of people in a wonderful kingdom. As in all fairy tales, there was one problem: There was a shortage of houses in the land. No one was teaching children to build houses anymore. When the people found there was a shortage of houses, they realized that their carpenters and plumbers were old, and not many were building houses any longer.

The King was a wise old fellow, and he knew exactly what to do. He charged off to the schools and said, "You must start teaching the children to build houses."

"But," said the teachers, "we know little about house building. How are we to teach the children to build houses?"

The King had a solution. "There are still some old carpenters and plumbers and others in our land who know how to build houses. We will hire them to teach the children."

"Oh no," argued the teachers, "those carpenters and plumbers do not know how to teach. They only know how to build."

"Well," said the King, "then you educators can teach them how to teach. We will have special workshops to teach them. We will ITT (I'll teach Trades)."

After the carpenters and plumbers had completed their special training, they went to the schools to teach children how to build houses. Many of the children were very happy to learn how to build things. It seemed great fun to get a chance to make something.

Each morning the carpenter and plumber teachers would gather the children about them to discuss their plans for building for that day. The children would plan the houses and discuss how to get the job done. They seemed to learn the most, however, from actually building houses. At times

things did not go well, and the teachers and students would sit together and discuss what they thought had gone wrong. Then they would set about making changes (revisions) in order to produce the kinds of houses that they could all be proud of.

Everyone in the kingdom seemed very happy. The children who were learning about building houses had lots of work to do. Houses were being built that were the envy of the surrounding kingdoms. The King was pleased. Once again he had solved a great problem for his people.

One day the King announced that he had heard about a great education conference that was to be held in a nearby kingdom. "I think I will go to the Great Education Conference to see if I can learn more to help our teachers."

When the King returned from the conference, he told his wife about the special Bragging Meeting. They said that just telling about houses was not admissible in the Bragging Meeting. They said that I needed test scores to really show what the children were learning. They said that test scores were reliable and valid."

"They even told me that if we do not have test scores, people from other lands will not know how good our schools are, and they will not bring their new businesses to our kingdom. I must go to the schools to ask the teachers about the children's test scores."

The next week the King met with all of the teachers and asked if the children were really learning anything. "Of course they are," said the carpenter and plumber teachers. "Just look at the wonderful houses in our land. Indeed, you live in one of those houses."

"Can we have test scores?" asked the King. "Can I have graphs and charts to take to the Great Education Conference? If we show our test

scores, people in other lands will see how much our children have learned and how good our schools are. They will want to move to our kingdom and bring their businesses here. We will prosper even more. I must have test scores!"

The carpenter and plumber teachers shyly responded that they did not know how to make tests. They said that they knew only how to make houses and other kinds of buildings and to teach children to build houses.

"Then I will bring a test builder to our kingdom," the King shouted. "I will find one to help us. I must have test scores so my country can flourish."

Several months later, the test builder arrived in the country and came to the schools to talk with the teachers. "If I am to build a test," said the test builder, "I must know what you are teaching the children. Tell me, what is it the children are learning?"

"Why," the carpenter and plumber teachers responded, "we are teaching the children to build houses. Surely you can see that."

"Of course, of course," said the test builder with a pained expression on his face. "What is it they learn each step of the way? We must understand each part and assess it carefully. What do they do first? What would someone do as the very first thing in starting to build a house?"

One of the carpenters was now sure he knew what the test builder was asking. "Why, the first thing is to pick up a hammer and hammer a nail in the wall."

"Good," responded the test builder, "now we are getting someplace."

"They have to know the names of the nails," called out another teacher.

"And the different kinds of wood," another joined in.

"Excellent! You really do know what you are teaching," said the test builder. The teachers were happy that they were able to please him. The teachers worked very hard and produced long lists of the things the test builder seemed to want on the lists. Indeed, the longer the lists became, the happier the test builder seemed to be.

After the meeting, the test builder announced that he would take all of the wonderful lists the teachers had produced a' would build a test to measure all of those things. The house-builder teachers were relieved to see the test builder leave, but some of them worried about what the test builder was going to do with all of those lists.

A year later, the test builder returned and announced that it was now time to test the children. The teachers were taught how to administer the tests, an activity that did not seem to them anything at all like house building. However, they did what the test builder asked. They told their students not to ask questions, not to work together, and not to look at each other's work. All of this seemed strange to the teachers since they had always encouraged the children to do those things when they taught them how to build houses.

Unknown to the teachers, to the test builder, and even to the King, a storyteller was observing silently in one of the house-building classes when the tests were given. The first question on the test was the very first thing the teachers had told the test builder when he had asked them exactly what they taught their children. The test item read as follows:

Given a wall and some nails, which of the following
should you pick up?

a. sledgehammer

b. claw hammer

c. ballpeen hammer

d. none of the above

e. all of the above

The storyteller noticed one of the children poking the student next to him (when the teacher was not looking), and he heard the child whisper, "Hey Billy, did you know our hammers had names? I'm gonna call mine 'George.' George is not one of the choices, so I guess "none of the above" is what I should mark."

Many of the students were as confused as this student, and the test results were not good at all. Indeed, when the test builder returned with a huge pile of test score reports, he told the King that the students had scored very poorly.

The King was devastated. "What am I to do? I thought our children were learning, but these test scores show they know nothing. I will never be able to go to the Great Education Conference. Now people will not want to move to our kingdom. We will not be able to attract new businesses to our land. Our test scores are too low."

The test builder said that he knew of other countries that had faced the same problem. "What did they do? You must tell me!" pleaded the King.

"They hired an educational consultant," said the test builder. "The educational consultant was able to help the teachers teach better. When the teachers taught better, the test scores went up."

"Then we will have an educational consultant to help our house-builder teachers." The King hurried off to tell the teachers. "It is good," he thought to himself, "that I went to the Great Education Conference and the Bragging Meeting. If I had not, I would never have discovered all of the problems in our schools."

Several weeks later the great educational consultant came to the land. The educational consultant met with some of the teachers to begin planning how they would improve education in the land with workshops. The educational consultant felt that teachers should be involved in planning workshops. "What is it you teach?" asked the consultant.

"Well," said one of the teachers, "I used to teach the children how to build houses, but the King seems to think the children are not learning anything, so I guess I should teach what is on the test."

"Good," said the consultant, "you know where you are going. You have your objectives clearly in mind. Now let's look at those tests to see what it is the children must learn. Then we can get on with our workshops on how to teach those things."

The educational consultant and the planning teachers scoured the tests and made lists of all the things that were asked on the tests.

After acquiring lists of the stuff that was included on the tests, the educational consultant planned a number of after-school workshops to help the teachers learn how to teach the lists of stuff. Some of the workshops were called Make-and-Take Workshops. At these sessions, all of the teachers would make things to help the children learn. On the backs of cardboard pictures of hammers, they would write the names of the hammers. These big cards were then used in classes to flash the pictures to the children so they would learn to immediately recognize the names of the hammers.

Another group of teachers drew pictures of the hammers in a column down one side of a sheet of paper. In a second column, they wrote the names of the hammers. However, they did not put the correct name of each hammer beside its picture. They thought, "We will have the children draw lines from the pictures of the hammers to the correct names of the hammers."

The educational consultant was delighted and would visit the schools to see how the teachers were putting all of the new ideas to work with the children. Some of the teachers were sure they were now teaching higher-order thinking skills. They all felt good because the children were learning so many things.

However, some of the teachers wondered if the children would ever be able to use the knowledge to once again build houses. "Of course," the educational consultant explained, "but first they must know all of the skills. Once they know the skills the rest will be easy."

For several years the new education program was implemented throughout the kingdom. Some teachers did notice that there wasn't much house building going on. However, no one seemed very concerned since the children would tell their parents all that they were learning, and many practice sheets went home with pumpkin faces and other horrific stamps on them. Some parents even brought their own sets of hammer flashcards so they could help their children at home.

Each year the test scores showed more improvement. The King was happy and knew that before long he would be able to once again go to the Great Education Conference and show off his test scores. However, he wanted to wait until the test scores throughout his country were sure to be the highest in all the lands.

As he waited, he and his wife decided to have an addition built on to the summer mansion they had built years before. As the addition began to take shape, the Queen looked at the work with growing concern. "It doesn't look very solid," she said, "especially the new balcony on the back. I think it is drooping on one side."

"Don't worry," said the King. "That addition is being built by

children who have the highest test scores in the history of our kingdom. Those are the best-educated house builders we have ever had in our land. They know what they are doing."

Before the new addition was completed, the latest test scores were released, and they had once again gone up. "These new test scores are marvelous," the King mused. "I can now go to the Great Education Conference and attend the Bragging Meeting." Off the King went to the Great Education Conference. The King had charts and tables with bar graphs. The charts and tables (of many colors) included percentiles, with many lines, bars, and connected dots.

Everyone at the Bragging Meeting was astounded! Such high test scores! Such sophisticated charts! Such wondrous analyses! This was the best bragging ever heard at the Bragging Meeting.

The King returned to his country, and a special parade was given in his honor. "Long live the Education King," the people shouted. The King had never been more popular nor more certain that he knew how to help his people. "You just have to set targets," he thought to himself, "and then find out where you are. The test builder and the educational consultant really knew what to do.

The King and his wife returned home at the end of the celebration to find that the addition to their house was now finished. It looked kind of shaky, but the King was sure that was just a benchmark of modern architecture. The King took his test score reports and marched out on the balcony. There was a terrible noise, like thousands of nails being ripped from their places. The balcony swayed. . . and then buckled. . . and then crashed to the ground!

Somewhere in some kingdom, there is joy in the land. Somewhere in some

kingdom, laughter can be heard, but not in this kingdom where the houses had all begun to fall apart.

The moral of this story ultimately became obvious to even the most faithful subjects of the King: There is a big difference between naming hammers and pounding nails in a wall. However, lest anyone believe that naming hammers is not important, just ask someone to get a particular type of hammer, and see what happens if the person fetching it doesn't know the types of hammers. On the other hand, and more importantly, standing with a hammer in one's hand and knowing its name doesn't make one a builder or tell one how to use the hammer.

Could there be a place for both knowledge and application?